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Do We Really Want to Be PROACTIVE? (Part 1)

by John Crossan
As we struggle to move from reactive to proactive maintenance, maybe at some point we just need to stop and ask ourselves the basic question:

“Do we really want to be proactive in maintenance? Really? Honestly?”

BRIEFLY RESTATING THE DIFFERENCE:

**REACTIVE MAINTENANCE** is dealing with loss issues due to equipment malfunction that show up unexpectedly and repairs have to be done immediately, on a crisis basis, in a very inefficient, unplanned, unscheduled way.

**PROACTIVE MAINTENANCE** is monitoring equipment for signs of deterioration and performing the necessary repairs and adjustments, when needed, in an efficient, planned, scheduled way, before a loss issue actually happens.

Who wouldn’t want to operate in the Proactive Mode?

Unless, maybe, you feel reactive behavior is actually useful in some ways?

One way would be

**Managers Using Crises As A Way To Keep Organizations Energized…**

Organizations and people seem to naturally get complacent over time. We fall into ruts in performance and behavior where we don’t like to push ourselves outside of the routine.

Procrastination seems to be a natural human tendency. “Why do something that will take some different kind of effort today?” Something that might lead to issues we haven’t had to deal with before. Something that might be difficult and stressful.

We don’t want to disrupt an environment that feels comfortable and safe.

So the status quo just gets stronger and stronger, and we feel more and more powerless and incapable of changing it.

We drift into the “Just Show Up Every Day” mode then wonder why we’re bored, feel insignificant and don’t seem to get much satisfaction from our work.

Visiting plants, it’s evident how purposeful, or not, people seem to be in their overall manner. Do they look and talk like they value their time and their contribution? Do they look and talk like they feel someone else values their contributions? Or does it seem like there’s just nothing of any immediate importance or concern? “Lack of a sense of urgency” is the term we use most often.

A few years back, a friend was very excited when he joined a large, well-known technical organization, but then left after barely a year, disappointed with the inertia of so many there who refused to, or just couldn’t, change their thinking and processes. And the company was just gradually fading.

So, it’s a manager’s job to keep an organization energized. To keep everyone moving onward and upward out of the rut. To maintain that sense of urgency. To build a culture where people are concerned when things are just not happening the way they should be, or could be, and they go ahead and systematically do something about it.

Energizing an organization is not an easy thing to do and crises, real or fabricated, and a push for immediate fixes are one way to do this.

A popular saying a few years back was: “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.”

Fixing today’s crises preempts everything else (and again crises that probably wouldn’t have even happened if basic proactive processes were in place).

It’s difficult to build a proactive culture when people feel they must always completely deal
with issues immediately, or face criticism and embarrassment in meetings, or perhaps worse. It can also become a competitive forum for the politically ambitious to display their ability to get their repairs dealt with quickly by diverting the most valuable resources, whether warranted or not.

Back to the military, George Armstrong Custer probably would say he wished he'd taken a little more time to better assess the situation.

While this affects all plant processes, particular damage can be done to the Maintenance System Processes. Things that typically happen in the crisis repair mode, even if the issue has already been mitigated (as they usually are), include:

- **We bypass the maintenance planning and scheduling process** that would get the repair done effectively and efficiently, normally at the earliest on next week’s schedule, but based on its priority in the overall plant scheme of things.

  We jump in and try to make the complete fix when we don’t exactly know what the problem is and whether we have what we need to fix it.

  And we disrupt the other work and the personnel we had scheduled, which perhaps means giving up some hard to come by downtime opportunities.

  But to some, a maintenance work management system is just administrative bureaucracy. We should be able to get it done right now, or something is wrong. And the planning role is just a misuse of a good technician who could otherwise be making repairs.

  So, now we’re wasting our limited maintenance resources.

- **We pull maintenance technicians away from performing preventive maintenance (PM) inspections** to deal with the issue. This obviously would seem to be the right thing, as inspections really don’t need to be done immediately.

  The problem, then, becomes that we never seem to be able find that right time to do them.

  So, now we’re doomed to dealing with even more surprise crises.

- **We use our “Best” individuals.** Pull them away from whatever they’re working on to deal with the crisis. Bypass the less developed individuals who could be learning from this. That would just slow things down.

  Also, as our mechanics are usually our best technical troubleshooters, so best to use them to solve operational issues, rather than waste time developing the operators.

- **We add to our Parts Inventory.** If we don’t have the part in stock, then immediately add it to the in-house stocked items list. So we can fix it quicker next time. (And now we just accepted that it will happen again.)

  Even though we may have previously made the decision not to stock it, as we can get it pretty quickly from a vendor anytime we need it.

  So, we’re again wasting valuable resources.

- **When we’ve made the repair, it’s done.** It’s over. It’s fixed.

  So, what’s the point of taking time for a follow-up review of what happened?

  Probably not even time to document the issue and what we did.

  On to the next.

  No discussion of what can be done to prevent it from recurring. So, history will undoubtedly repeat itself. And again, we’re wasting a capability development step.

Of course, we will always have to make some immediate crisis repairs and we have to have that capability developed, but we need to recognize that immediate repair is a very ineffective, inefficient activity.

So, we’re wasting developmental opportunities that will increase our resources.

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Part 2 of this article addresses: How Do We Do Both?

- **Deal effectively with issues in a proactive way;**

- **Keep the organization energized.**
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